MMOZine

ISSUE 40 | JULY 2012

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CHAPTER V PREVIEW!

Runes of Magic

E3 2012 REPORT

F1 ONLINE

SUPER MONDAY NIGHT COMBAT

THE SECRET WORLD

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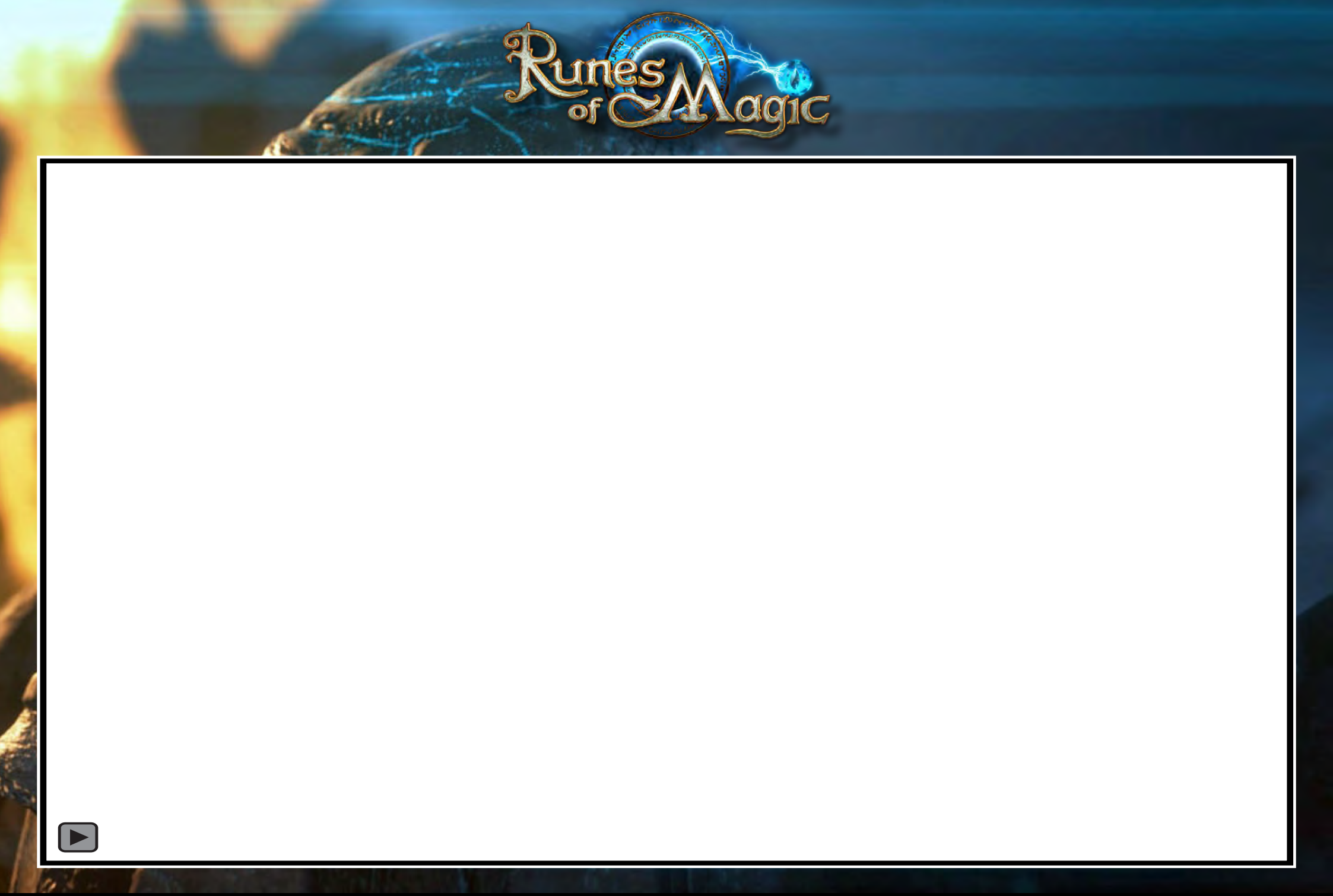

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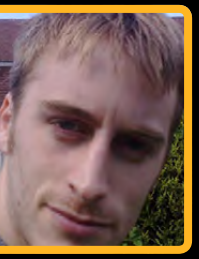

With all the MMORPGs currently spread around the Internet, it's easy to become infatuated with new games on the horizon rather than taking stock of what's already out there. We're sure that *Runes of Magic* gracing our front cover this month will raise a few eyebrows among gamers, especially with the release of *The Secret World* and *Guild Wars 2* on the horizon, but sometimes it's better to look laterally rather than gazing to the future.

The team behind *Runes of Magic* doesn't have the budget of ArenaNet or Funcom, but they still manage to regularly improve their free-to-play game with bulky chapter updates which consistently offer new skills, classes and regions to explore. That's something worth celebrating and this month we've take the time to tell you exactly what the latest update offers. We also take yet another look at the soon-to-be-released hit *The Secret World* and discover how Codemasters want to bring the thrill of Formula One to a browser. Can they do it? Well, you'll have to read on to find out…

We hope you enjoy the issue!

Andy Griffiths, Editor
mmozine@gamerzines.com

Don't miss! *This month's highlights!*

RUNES OF MAGIC: CHAPTER V FIRES OF SHADOWFORGE

THE SECRET WORLD

F1 ONLINE

SUPER MONDAY NIGHT COMBAT

QUICK FINDER

Bullet Run
E3 2012 Report
F1 Online
The Secret World
World of Battleships
Runes of Magic: Chapter V
Super Monday Night Combat

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THE SECRET WORLD

"ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT MMORPGS OF OUR TIME"

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BULLET RUN

PUB: SONY ONLINE
DEV: ACONY GAMES
ETA: SUMMER

FIRST LOOK

New name, same game?

ONE TO WATCH!

The free-to-play market is rapidly changing. Months ago all a developer needed to do to differentiate their game from the rest was make it free and players would flock to their wares like fat men around a Las Vegas buffet, but now the competition has become so bloated that studios need substantial amounts of cash in order to make the ad-splash necessary to grow their online community.

The reality-show shooter *Hedone* was one victim of that trend, but with the help of SOE the 20-man competitive online shooter is being rebranded and remodelled with new taunting gameplay, which inspires gamers to insult their prey before they shoot them, and unique abilities dubbed 'Kill Skills'. Sometimes a good name is really all that a developer needs and we have no doubt that SOE will ensure *Bullet Run* gets more attention than its under-rated predecessor. ■

Attack of the Clones

Despite being a regular deathmatch shooter, Acony Games have added some story elements to *Bullet Run*. The game actually revolves around a nifty near-future reality gameshow concept where combatants need to kill each other in the most entertaining way possible in order to 'entertain' those watching the action on TV. It sounds barbaric, but each victim is instantly resurrected in time for the next match, so that's okay.

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WORLD OF BATTLESHIPS

PUB: WARGAMING.NET
DEV: IN-HOUSE
ETA: TBA

FIRST LOOK

War on a whole new front

DEBUT SCREENS!

First there were tanks, then there were planes and now there's Battleships. Wargaming.net are almost single-handedly bringing modern warfare to the MMO-loving masses and *World of Battleships* is their next great endeavour. Like their previous simulations, this seafaring experience will feature easy-to-understand controls, a deep economy system and the ability to wage war against hundreds of other players on a single server.

For the moment the Russian developers are being very quite about how this ties into their other big ongoing project *World of Warplanes*, but we personally think it would be silly if there wasn't some kind of crossover. Captain, prepare my vessel! ■

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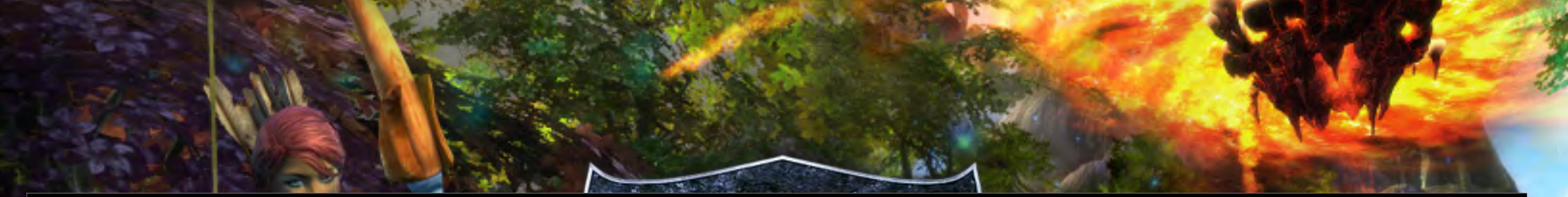

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E3 2012
END OF SHOW REVIEW

First shots of ELDER SCROLLS ONLINE Emerge

Despite being in development for five years, Bethesda are still being careful not to reveal too much about their MMORPG extension of the beloved *Elder Scrolls* license. Aside from a selection of screens, which you can see just below here, there wasn't the big unveiling we were perhaps expecting.

Regardless, new details seeped their way out during demonstrations including 200-man PvP battles, real-time action-orientated combat and emergent quest design, which means activities sometimes will seek the player out rather than vice versa. We have a sneaking suspicion that Bethesda didn't want to steal too much thunder from the forthcoming *Skyrim* expansion *Dragonfall*, which is perhaps why we've only got a few screenshots to show you rather than a substantial gameplay demo. That said, we're sure this project's turn in the limelight isn't too far away. Here's hoping the next time we see *Elder Scrolls Online* we'll find out exactly what sets this online-only experience apart has its incredibly successful single-player counterparts.

All the news from gaming's biggest industry event!

Even though Blizzard and NCsoft weren't in attendance at this year's E3, it doesn't mean that the show wasn't a big deal for anyone that has a passion for MMOs. BioWare, SOE, Trion Worlds and other major industry hitters were in attendance to let gamers know exactly what they have planned over the coming months, and even though there weren't many surprises, there was still plenty to get excited about. Forthcoming releases and updates were unveiled for the first time, while other projects were delved into in much greater detail than they had been previously.

In this handy little feature we countdown the big stories from the show and what exactly this year's E3 means for this magazine's favourite genre. Some stories will lead to excitement, others open condemnation but we hope that you feel better for knowing about them. We could have done a 'Best Games of E3' feature but in all honesty, who wants to read that? ■

STAR WARS: THE OLD REPUBLIC On trial

The biggest MMO news at E3 wasn't to do with a new game or a glitzy celebrity appearance, instead it was BioWare confirming that just over six months since launch, *Star Wars: The Old Republic* will be implementing a trial system this July, which allows all gamers to try out the subscription-only MMORPG for free up to level 15.

Anyone who's played *TOR* before will tell you that's a hefty amount of content to give out without committing gamers to either purchasing the game outright or a monthly fee. This new functionality will arrive this July, and its indicative of not only how much BioWare and EA want to bolster subscription figures, but also how confident they are that their authentic Star Wars experience will hook interested parties from the get-go. Will this kind of bold move help new players get invested? We think so, as the first dozen or so levels in *TOR* are some of the best gameplay to be found in any genre. Of course, whether that gameplay is more suitable to a single-player RPG rather than an MMORPG is a completely different case entirely.

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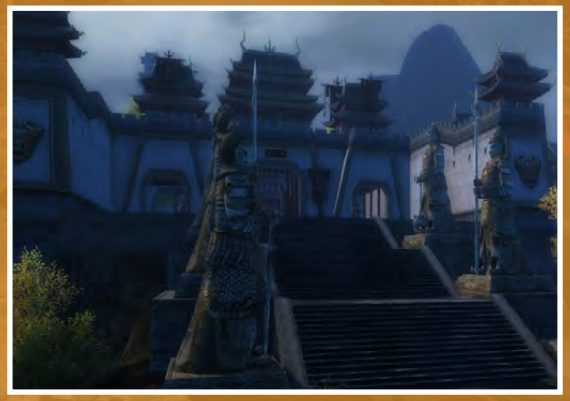
Play Trailer

AGE OF WULIN Bringing the star power

We've been looking forward to this Chinese-developed MMORPG, which allows gamers to learn the ways of the Ming Dynasty and wuxia-style kung fu, for absolutely ages and this E3 unfortunately didn't really bring much in the way of new developments out of the woodwork. All was not lost however as it has been ordained that retired martial arts master Jet Li will be the face of this game's North American launch, which is now to be referred to only as *Age of Wushu*, however in Europe the name is unchanged. Confused? We are too.

Why our US cousins need to call their version of this combat MMORPG something different is a mystery to us, but we assume it's to do with a copyright or translation issue, rather than on the whim of Mr Lee, although we'd love to believe otherwise. Who says star power is dead, eh?



PLANETSIDE 2 Expectations soar

One word sums up *PlanetSide 2*: scale. At E3 SOE gave the showgoers the first hands-on opportunity and the response was overwhelmingly positive. Many specialist websites praised this free-to-play shooter for its beautiful visuals, stunning scope and the current build hasn't even exited the Alpha stage of development! There was also talk of a new tie-in tablet and smartphone app which allows players to communicate with each other over VoIP outside of servers, but it's the game itself which has us really excited. Check out one of the rare gameplay videos below to see why.

RIFT Conjures up a storm

During E3 Trion Worlds announced that their debut MMO *RIFT* would be getting its first expansion. *Storm Legion* will add two new continents and will feature its own dedicated story revolving around Crucia, The Queen of Storms. Impressively, the hefty content pack will triple the amount of content and land mass the world of Telera currently boasts with new activities puzzles, titles, artefacts, collectibles and skills to seek out. If that wasn't enough, Trion Worlds are also adding the ability for guilds and players to own and customise their own houses – a feature often requested by fans – and they're raising the level cap from 50 to 60. The price of this expansion has yet to be revealed but seeing as Trion Worlds are asking players to subscribe to *RIFT* to progress their character past level 20, we suspect when *Storm Legion* launches come autumn, it won't offend your bank balance too much.

We're really pleased *RIFT* is continuing to do well after making such a good impression when it launched late last year. Could this be Trion Worlds' way of combating the looming fantasy juggernaut that is *Guild Wars 2*? Who knows, but one thing is for sure, and that's the fact that plenty of people will head back to servers once this new expansion goes live. Mark our words.

FINAL FANTASY XIV Reboot still coming

Last year's most disappointing online release is being overhauled from the ground-up with a sleek new UI, a substantially more diverse character creator, better visuals and (wait for it) the ability for your character to apply pressure to his feet and lift several inches into the air. Square-Enix called it 'jumping' we think, and it's the kind of MMORPG functionality which could revolutionise the genre… wait a moment, what's that? Almost every other game on the planet gives players the freedom to jump around? Well, fiddlesticks. At least the developers behind this troubled release confirmed that the substantial 2.0 update is on track to be released this October and that they'll release a trailer which showcases all their hard work next month.

Who knows whether there will still be enough people interested in *FFXIV* to care, but we're intrigued to see how the game is transformed.

And so it was...

E3 used to be the perfect ground for developers to showcase their online wares, but with the free-to-play landscape expanding and the problems associated with new games getting noticed against the backdrop of console makers sounding off about their various projects (none of which fell under the purview of MMO we might add), it would be easy to see this year's industry showcase as a bit of a let down.

Rather than new online games being pushed to the forefront it was the same old acronyms (LoTRO, SWTOR, RIFT) that stole the limelight. Whether or not that's a problem we'll leave up to you, but we will say that this year we certainly noticed a dearth of original games which is perhaps indicative of the fact that MMO games are changing. The big marquee releases which used to cut through the noise are no longer in the number they used to be, instead they're vastly outnumbered by smaller yet less risky endeavours, most of which can't compete in such a cutthroat environment. That's why events like gamescom, where consumers can gain entry to the show as well as business types, have become the home for MMO makers, as it puts them as close as possible as the people that really count: actual gamers. So if you're a little underwhelmed by E3 2012 don't worry, as gamescom is just around the corner. August can't come soon enough!

LOTRO Rides into view again

It's easy to forget about *Lord of the Rings Online*, or at least it would be if we didn't keep banging on about it. Yes, we know last month we promised we wouldn't talk about this ageing property for at least an issue or two, but damn it all if Turbine didn't have a great E3 showing.

LOTRO has been quietly doing its thing for years now with little fanfare, but at E3 the free-to-play endeavour attracted a lot of attention thanks to the studio finally announcing that forthcoming expansion, *Riders of Rohan*, will be released this autumn. The studio also released a stable full of screenshots in an effort to tempt gamers into putting some money towards a pre-order, and unsurprisingly they all look very impressive.

For the uninitiated, *RoR* finally adds the ability for players to fight on horseback, an entirely new realm to explore and a level cap raise to 85. Mounted combat certainly looks impressive from what we've seen and the fact that the new realm of Rohirrim is substantially bigger than any environment Turbine have created before means that this hefty expansion has more than enough content to satisfy even the most doting of Tolkein enthusiast. Fly you fools!

HI DEF VIDEO

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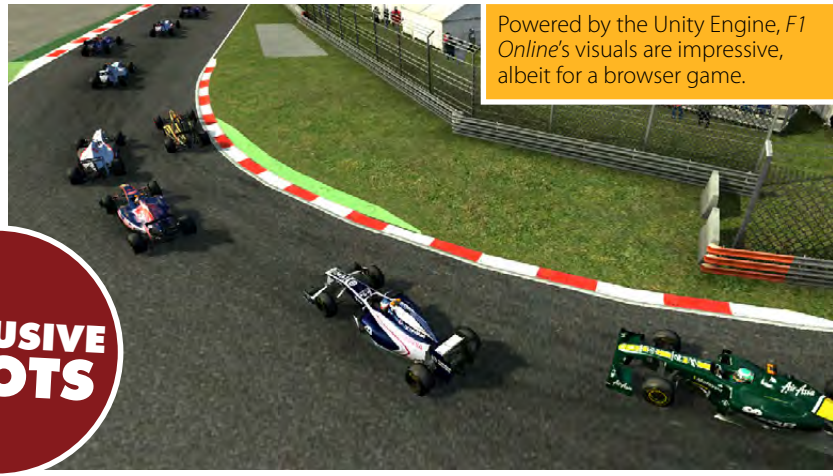

Powered by the Unity Engine, *F1 Online*'s visuals are impressive, albeit for a browser game.

EXCLUSIVE SHOTS

F1 ONLINE
HANDS-ON

PUB: CODEMASTERS
DEV: IN-HOUSE
LAST GAME: N/A
ETA: CURRENTLY IN BETA

A browser experience worth having

Oh, browser games. There are so many of you out there, yet if we were being honest (really brutally honest) there's only a handful of you that are actually worth the web space you occupy. The problem isn't for want of trying, as there are thousands of you out there vying for our virtual cash, yet you all tend to fall under the same umbrella: turn-based strategy.

Thankfully, *F1 Online* has little in common with those money-grabbing time wasters, packing a fully featured racing experience which allows players to not only race against others on official Formula One sanctioned tracks with the team and driver of their choice, but also nurturing their own custom team from scratch to dominate the online racing world without having to spend a fortune.

When we sat down to play *F1 Online* for the first time we were a little apprehensive. After all, how could a browser experience seek to compete with its simulation-orientated bigger brother, *F1 2011*. The answer is of course it doesn't, not directly. Codemasters are looking to capture casual racing fans who perhaps don't want to dedicate hours of their life learning intricately recreated tracks, and instead just want to experience a taste of what

TWITTER

@freddowd
Test drive went well. Bit stuttery but pretty decent #F1Online

@guyver1_
just took my first 2nd place in #F1Online beta test \o/ go me.

@thereal_tora
@Formula1game Looking forward to #F12012. Great job with #F1Online btw

@f1onlinethegame
For each new Follower we get, we'll send out an invite, so 1,000 new Followers is 1,000 invites!

TWEET US @GAMERZINES

Extravagant paint jobs for your car or helmet can usually only be bought for real money.

Even with this simplified driving model, you soon get an idea how tight some F1 tracks really are.

it's like to go wheel-to-wheel against 23 other drivers online.

The good news is their latest racing venture absolutely does that, but rather than sitting in the cockpit, you have a birds-eye view of the action and need to control your car only by using the mouse and keyboard. In principle this sounds like a nightmare, but after sampling a brief driving lesson around Abu Dhabi it suddenly becomes clear just how genius the control scheme really is. Effectively you use the mouse for steering, aided by a set of on-screen arrows to show you where you're pointing, and the keys to activate DRS and KERS. With the help of on-screen prompts and a 2D track layout to guide you, it becomes simple to keep your car on the grey stuff. When mistakes happen you simply reset your car and carry on racing.

Despite appearing relatively simplistic, the racing in *F1 Online* is a fairly accurate approximation of real-world racing. Entry and exit speeds need to be carefully considered, optimum corner trajectories need to be maintained and you need to pitch passes against fellow human pilots carefully, as to not lose speed.

Rather than racing against AI, every event either in quick race or dedicated championships has you always competing against other human drivers on dedicated servers, so nobody enjoys an unfair advantage. As a result, you do need to wait a minute or two to get into

> *"It suddenly becomes clear, just how genius the control scheme really is"*

races, especially when waiting on 24 different machines to synchronise, but even in Beta stage the racing in *F1 Online* is absurdly good fun. It's very forgiving, with no damage system or penalty system to punish aggressive behaviour, but for a browser game, Codemasters' latest is certainly impressive.

For those that just want a quick racing fix there's the official championship mode where you race with real F1 cars on real tracks,

INTERVIEW

MICHAEL ROWLAND
Live Producer

***F1 Online* seems like a very robust game, which will surprise a lot of gamers as when the 'free-to-play browser' label gets thrown around it's all too easy for people to lose faith…**

We've been very fortunate. The guys at Codemasters Birmingham have sent us all their assets [used in *F1 2011*]; we have a great pipeline between us, them and FOM (Formula One Management). It's all been very nicely done, we started showing it off for the first time at gamescom last year, and at that point we had Monaco and a few other circuits done. Most of the race elements were included, but we didn't have any of the management stuff in there, as we were still working on those at the time. I think we're going to be working on those aspects forever! It's always going to be evolving. Once we started putting all that into place it started to make sense as a game, and it's been a bit of a rollercoaster putting it all together. We have some very good monetisation people as well who know all the tricks.

So the whole time-verses-money reward thing?

We don't have anything in there that's game breaking, it's just a convenience thing at the end of the day. We've all done it; we're all addicted to it.

Could historical liveries be on the table at some point or anything similar to that?

I couldn't possibly say, but there's a lot of stuff potentially we can do. In the custom [career] side of *F1 Online*, we try to steer clear of anything official looking or anything that has a historic feel, because we don't want to infringe on licensing. It's very hard to do vintage stuff, as there's a lot of older sponsors out there that don't exist any more, so we need to stay aware. Obviously we can add things into the game that look similar, but fortunately on the custom side of things we don't actually have any real sponsors at all. That's advantageous for us, as it means we have the freedom to do anything.

We can do loads more achievements, and we're going to constantly evolve that as we add more content to the game. Your car is going to have a unique look and feel, as you progress through the game anyway. The way it's going, we've got thousands and thousands of different iterations of cars, via each component you can add throughout the game, and I think there's around 40,000 different possibilities.

With regards to the tournament side of the game, where you can take your created car and enrol in competitions for more XP and

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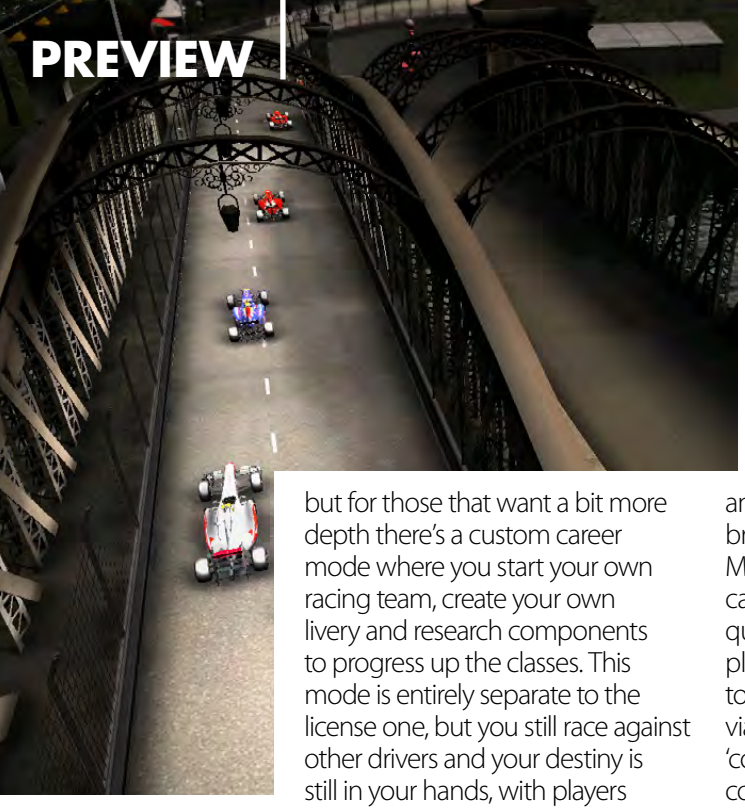


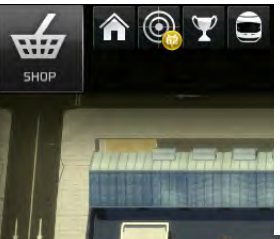
The Unity engine allows Codemasters to directly port cars from *F1 2011* to *F1 Online*.

but for those that want a bit more depth there's a custom career mode where you start your own racing team, create your own livery and research components to progress up the classes. This mode is entirely separate to the license one, but you still race against other drivers and your destiny is still in your hands, with players eventually gaining access to specific championships to win more XP and in-game cash.

Upgrading your HQ for better components like new front wings, better gearboxes, improved DRS etc. is handled in real-time, and works in a similar way to browser-based strategy games. Manufacturing and research actions can take hours and need to be queued up, and as this is a free-to-play endeavour there are options to boost technological progress via XP, cash or staff boosters. These 'convenience' items do muddy the competitive waters, but there's also more frivolous items like unlocking more exotic-looking colours and liveries for your car.

When compared with other free-to-play browser experiences *F1 Online* certainly stands out, not only because its separate licensed and custom race components are so well thought out, but also due to the fact that visually it's a good-looking game. Also the fact that pay-to-win items aren't tied directly to a player's competitive advantage bodes well for its longevity.

Aside from lacking any kind of social framework currently in the Beta, *F1 Online* is shaping up as a great online playground for those that have an affinity for Bernie Ecclestone's mega motorsport. We doubt it'll appeal much to those that don't love open-wheel racing, but luckily enough there's quite a few F1 fans kicking around. ■



INTERVIEW CONT.

cash. Could you have sponsored events and things of that ilk?
Very much so. The system itself has been designed so we can do live championships. All we need to do is go into the back-end and, say, the German Grand Prix is going on a certain weekend, we could have a themed championship to go out during that time. We can do lots of different things. We have a lot of tools and the guys want to do some pretty cool stuff that we've been asking for since day one. There's definitely room to surprise and do something new and different now and then.

Seeing *F1 Online* uses real-time as a resource for researching new components, etc. Is there ever a danger of having to reset the game, as surely it makes it hard for new guys to knock the top guys from their pedestal if they're always playing catch-up? Will there be seasons to counteract that trend?
Definitely for the rolling stuff. We're starting to get the *F1 2012* assets over now and from there we'll start to work on that. There will definitely be different things for the licensed stuff, as we start resetting drivers, teams and performance. Tournaments are exactly the same, and every 24 hours we have new tournaments running – as opposed to waiting for race season we can cut that down to a few weeks. There's a lot of things the guys want to do with regards to the custom mode – that'll be our bread and butter where people are playing the game. We opened up the Beta properly a few weeks ago, and we had lots of people coming in, so there's lots of interest out there.

There are a lot of F1 fans out there that perhaps find racing sims too intimidating, and it seems to us that *F1 Online* completely suits that niche. . .
Yeah, it isn't quite MMO *Championship Manager* with stats and things, but under the surface there is a lot of that information going on. Everything is calculated on the track, so you have full physics, surface types and aerodynamics that all play an important part, but we communicate that in a way that's very easy to understand. Also progressing through the custom side as well, we showed you the tech-tree which shows basically of all the components, but what you didn't see were the separate layers. You can build up on a B-class component, so your rear-wing can go up like five different levels. As you start researching and getting new buildings, that actually adds an extra of layer of complexity to your components. There's a lot of depth there and we've spent a lot of time creating them!

Hopefully we have enough to keep people busy until we bring out updates one, two and three. The plan is we get people playing, get their feedback in, factor in our own plans, take into consideration what the players want and evolve the game in that direction. ■

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Chrysalia is one of the most beautiful environments ever featured in *Runes of Magic*.

RUNES OF MAGIC FIRES OF SHADOWFORGE

LATEST INFO

PUB: FROGSTER
DEV: RUNEWAKER
LAST GAME: N/A
ETA: OUT NOW

QUICK QUOTES

"It's clear that Frogster's effort has substantially evolved with a very generous progression curve"

TWEET US @GAMERZINES

A big update starring tiny Dwarfs

Since 2009, *Runes of Magic* has been quietly going about its business. As one of the first purpose-built free-to-play MMORPGs to make its way to the West, players lambasted at launch for its 'pay-to-win' design philosophy and fantasy tropes that were more than a little inspired by a certain Blizzard game we won't care to mention.

Fast forward three years later and *RoM* has had four substantial content updates and has only recently received yet another, and it's clear that Frogster's effort has substantially evolved with a very generous progression curve which doesn't force players to get their wallets out at the in-game shop, and enough players to ensure that being able to group up is easy on well-populated servers, regardless of level. So what's next for this successful fantasy experience?

Regular and consistently high quality updates have been the secret to *Runes of Magic*'s popularity, delivering enough new content to keep players satisfied across the length and breadth of the level curve and, unsurprisingly, the latest expansion also does exactly that.

Fires of Shadowforge stars an all-new playable race: the Dwarves. Now we know what you're thinking, 'Oh great a 'new' race which every MMORPG and their mum has

Shadowforge is exactly the sort of environment you'd expect Dwarves to reside.

boasted at one time or another' – well you're right in that the race itself isn't original, but *Runes of Magic*'s implementation certainly is.

The diminutive ones have been awakened by some inquisitive scientists, after a magical 'present' immobilised their race for centuries by turning them all into stone – that's some gift! If you choose to role out as this new race, which join the Humans and Elves, your character begins just moments after their entire civilisation has been brought back to life.

Your goal as one of the two new classes, either the magic-wielding Warlock or melee-focused Champion, is to reunite the Dwarven race, reaffirm their status as one of the most powerful factions in Taborea and find out who (or perhaps more aptly what) was responsible for their slumber.

SMALL LEGS, BIG HEARTS

To support this intriguing story concept there's also a new starter area to explore, the all-new capital city of Taffrock, which boasts several areas including great halls, a massive mine and plenty of objects which further pad out the history of this new race. Rather than just being foolhardy warriors, this set of fantasy Dwarves harnesses magical psychic powers and a passion for technological advancement, so while wandering around Shadowforge's capital city, don't be surprised if you see mysterious machines and giant clanking cogs on your travels.

> *"Don't be surprised if you see mysterious machines and giant clanking cogs"*

RoM's take on this established fantasy archetype certainly reminded us a little bit of *Guild Wars*' Asura, especially as areas of the city boasted unnatural colour hues and themes of civilised society conquering and harvesting the awesome power of nature.

Champion
Clever technicians who become proficient enough in rune casting to pass the rune armament tests receive certification to make their own custom rune armaments. These people are called Champions.
A Champion that in battle can release runic energy that is comparable to the damage dished by a warrior. Moreover, whenever they're cornered by a powerful
ZOOM

Seeing Dwarves cast magic attacks is a bit of a culture shock.

The two different Dwarf classes compliment each other really well.

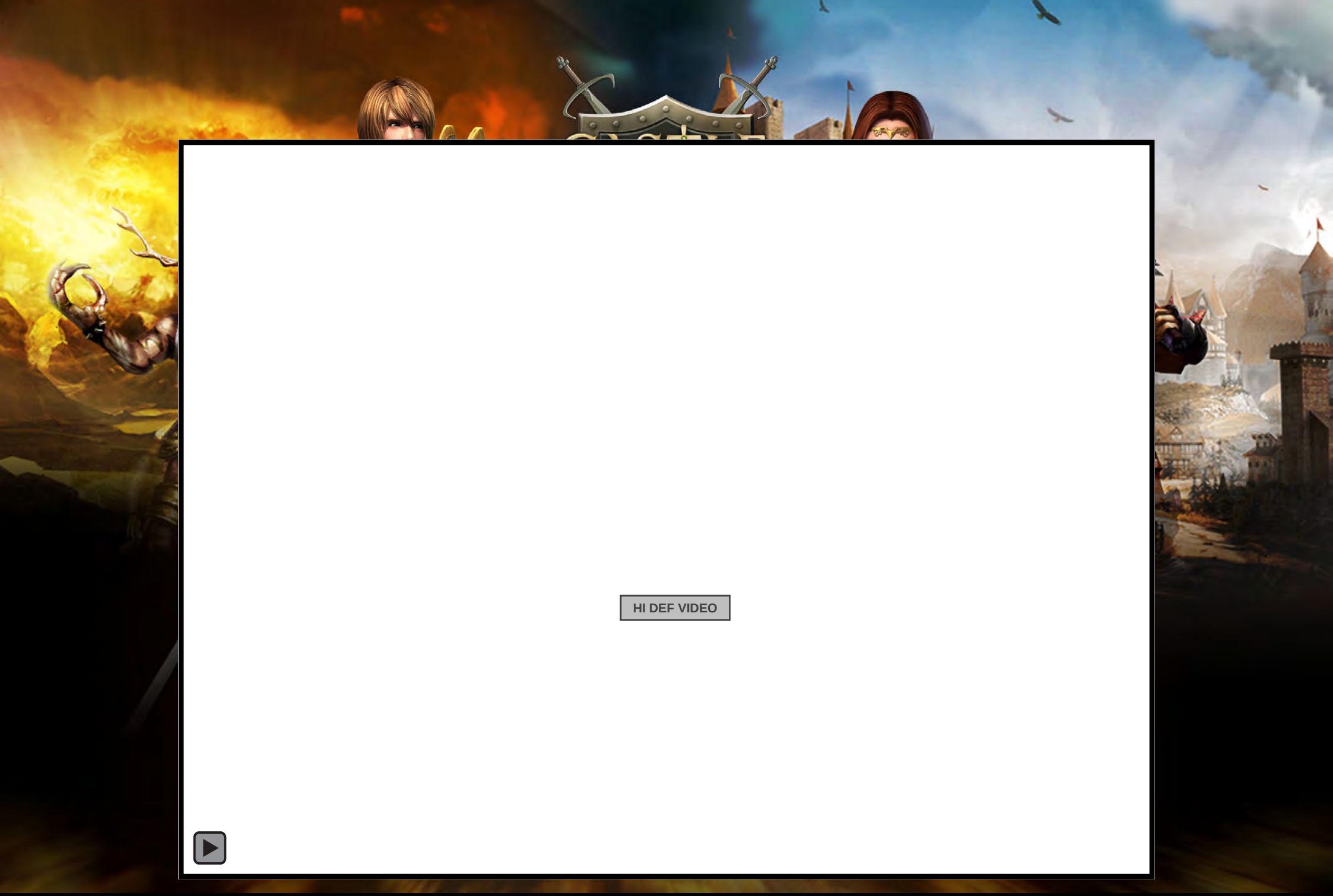
All of these tropes are communicated in a very traditional manner, via lengthy quest logs and NPC characters chucking substantial bubbles of text at you repeatedly, but there's more than enough detail to get wrapped up in the fiction if you're that way inclined. After completing a bunch of introductory quests in this Dwarf-only starting area it concludes with an all-new instance which involves the player fighting a very intimidating Dark Gargoyle, and from there you're free to explore the rest of the world, which has been bolstered out with an all-new continent, dubbed Kolydia.

The new landmass has two new high-level regions to explore – the Kingdom of Rorazan and Chrysalia – both of which are substantially different from one another. Rorazan's hellish landscape populated by walking fire golems is the antithesis of Chrysalia's green hills and stoney ruins. The latter land is a landscape wrought by tribal warfare and it's up to you with a team of fellow adventurers to allow peace to permeate throughout all of the land.

> *"There's more than enough detail to get wrapped up in the fiction"*

As updates go, *Fires of Shadowforge* is certainly a hefty one and signifies *RoM* offering established players something new and different from what they've seen before. We're still unsure whether this free-to-play MMORPG is as welcoming to newcomers as it perhaps should be, but there's no doubt that there's plenty of content in Chapter V for existing players to sink their teeth into. ■

The new enemy designs are pretty different from what you'll have seen before.



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Transylvania is the next stop after conquering Egypt.

THE SECRET WORLD
HANDS-ON

EXCLUSIVE SHOTS

PUB: ELECTRONIC ARTS
DEV: FUNCOM
LAST GAME: AGE OF CONAN
ETA: 3RD JULY

Soon the secrets will be revealed...

Thanks to a multitude of open Beta weekends and enough previews to fuel some other conspiracies, we're guessing you have a good grasp of *The Secret World* by now. Funcom's story-driven MMO, which is set in a version of our world where the occult is very much real, is shaping up very nicely. More importantly though, the subscription release is actually pretty different from the norm, with a classless progression structure which means any character can learn every skill in the game, and even switch their builds on the fly.

The big mystery however is how all these different concepts tie together in the game's spooky end-game, and that's exactly the kind of speculation Funcom looked to dispel by taking us around a few choice areas – namely Transylvania and a previously unseen part of Egypt.

We're going to keep the plot details to an absolute minimum, but needless to say having previously played a hefty chunk of Egypt and the Solomon Islands we definitely got a sense that the fiction was tying itself together in some really interesting ways involving ancient historical races and commonly misunderstand myths… and that's all we'll say.

Transylvania certainly felt like an suitable apex to the game with

TWITTER

@funcom_tsw
The Secret World has gone GOLD! 1.3 million now registered to beta test.

@teppotastic
Still can't decide on Faction for #TSW : Order out of Chaos, Guiding the Meek or Personal Power. Decisions, decisions!

@thenewfiz
@ArenaNet, @Funcom, Et Al. I will not pay for the privilege of beta testing your game. Give me free beta.

@sugarlessllama
@funcom_tsw I seriously want to give someone other than Blizz my money. But nobody wants to make an MMO for Mac

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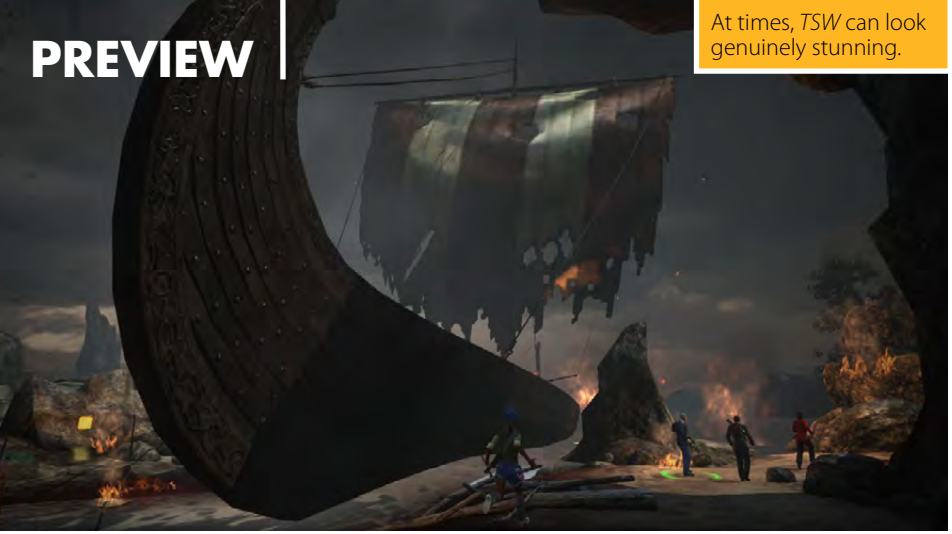
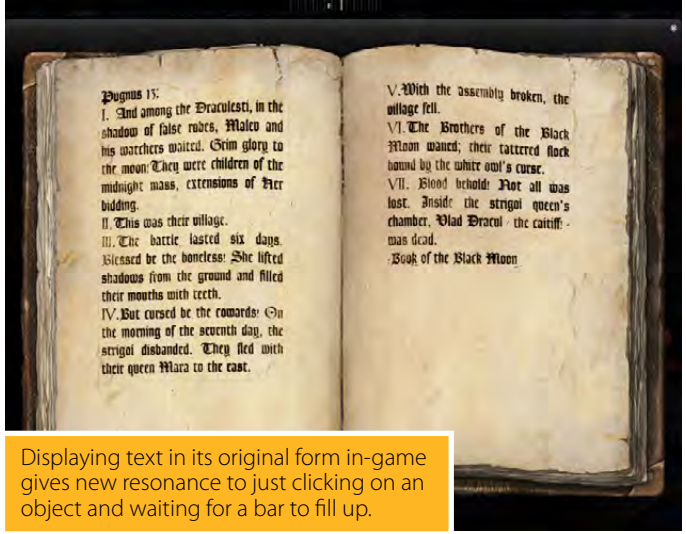
DD MM YYYY

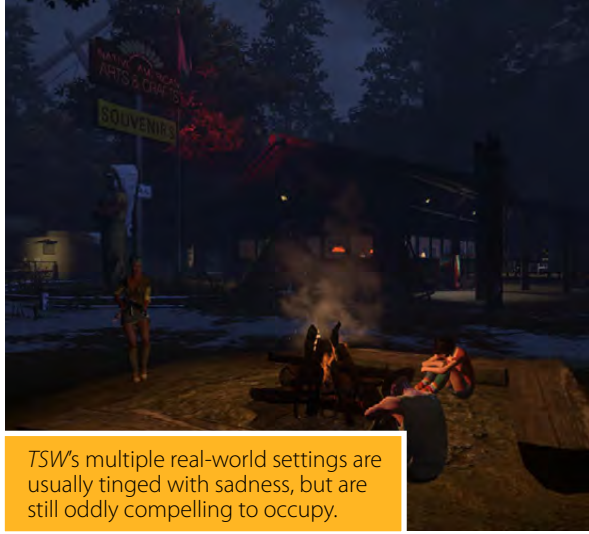
Play Trailer



At times, *TSW* can look genuinely stunning.


Pugnus IX.
I. And among the Draculesti, in the shadow of false rules, Maleo and his watchers waited. Grim glory to the moon! They were children of the midnight mass, extensions of Her bidding.
II. This was their village.
III. The battle lasted six days. Blessed be the boneless! She lifted shadows from the ground and filled their mouths with teeth.
IV. But cursed be the cowards: On the morning of the seventh day, the strigoi disbanded. They fled with their queen Mara to the east.
V. With the assembly broken, the village fell.
VI. The Brothers of the Black Moon waned; their tattered flock bound by the white owl's curse.
VII. Blood beholds: Not all was lost. Inside the strigoi queen's chamber, Vlad Dracul - the caitiff - was dead.
Book of the Black Moon

Displaying text in its original form in-game gives new resonance to just clicking on an object and waiting for a bar to fill up.



TSW's multiple real-world settings are usually tinged with sadness, but are still oddly compelling to occupy.

corrupted humans, fungi-covered giants populating the wilderness, with only an ancient Romany fighting force to stop them. In one of the faction's villages we sampled, the dialogue in some of the missions again showcased how well Funcom can write dialogue and create interesting characters. Unfortunately our time with the camp was cut short, as it was a bit of a whistle-stop tour, but our team of five had no problem dispatching any demon, ghosts or monsters we came across thanks to our team's handy level 10 gear. What Funcom were really keen to show us however was one of *TSW*'s penultimate dungeons – a mission dubbed 'The Darkness War'.

LIVING HISTORY

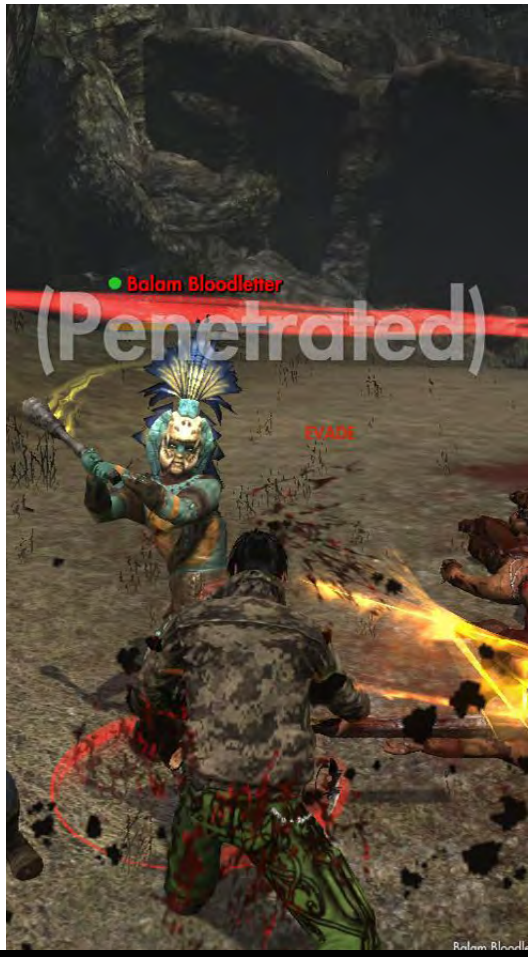
We've spoken before about how Funcom regularly play with player expectations and this instanced area completely summed up that approach. The mission starts as usual with a detailed briefing, via a carefully directed cut-scene and sees the participants instantly transported to a time that's a millennia prior to the modern day. When we awoke we were on an unnamed island, an environment that's seemed like a nexus for all things weird and wonderful, with Mayans fighting against Vikings in backdrops punctuated by both races' marooned ships and darkness spewing monsters spoiling what was otherwise a rather idyllic setting.

> *"We were in an environment that was a nexus for all things weird and wonderful"*

Where this all feeds into the grand narrative we have no idea, but seeing these two cultures literally clash was a revelation, and a perfect example of how Funcom are taking established MMO tropes and taking them in new directions. The boss design was really interesting too, often placing more of an emphasis on player placement and recognising attack routines, rather than a team's brute strength.

Puddles of darkness spewed around boss characters regularly causing major damage whenever a character ventured near them, but this in turn was further complicated by rotating 2D columns on the floor that signified where the next push attack would originate from. It's additions like these that give combat a really reactive and fast-paced feel, especially when you narrowly avoid an attack by rolling out of the way.

There's a lot of core features we haven't talked about yet – like swapping combat builds and story design – but regardless of that, questing around Transylvania certainly felt special – like it would be worth the dozens of hours of investment to get to. The release of this assuredly different MMORPG is just around the corner and we genuinely can't wait to play more! Expect a review next issue. ■



SUPER MONDAY NIGHT COMBAT

One-part tower defence, two-part MOBA

ROLL OVER FOR INFO!

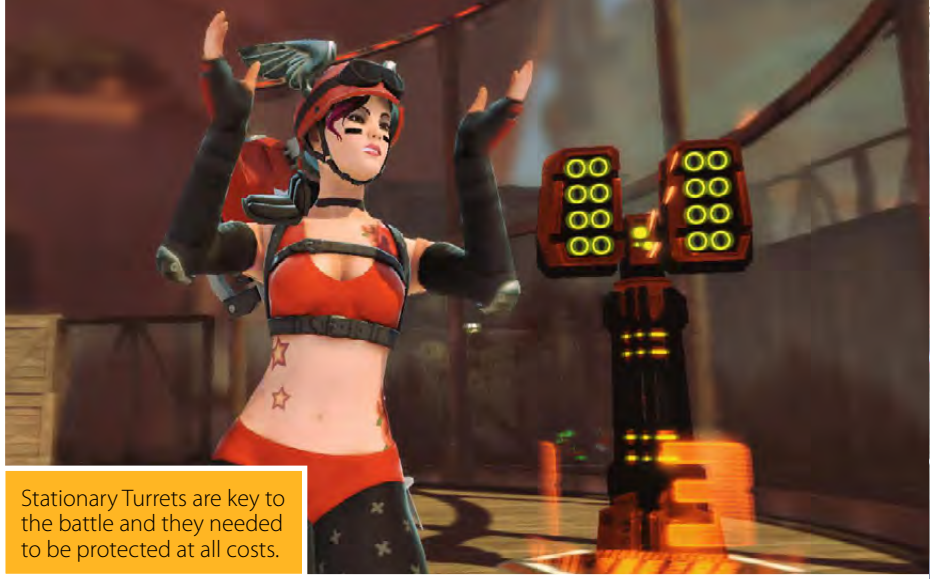
PUB: UBER ENTERTAINMENT
DEV: IN-HOUSE
LAST GAME: MONDAY NIGHT COMBAT
ETA: OUT NOW

There are two kinds of free-to-play games out there right now, ones that have been built for the new revenue model from the ground-up, and others which have micro-transactions slapped onto an already successful gameplay concept. *Super Monday Night Combat* is undoubtedly the former and for an arena shooter it has a great deal of personality with colourful characters, a family-friendly gladiatorial setting and novel chicken-enthused third-person shooter action.

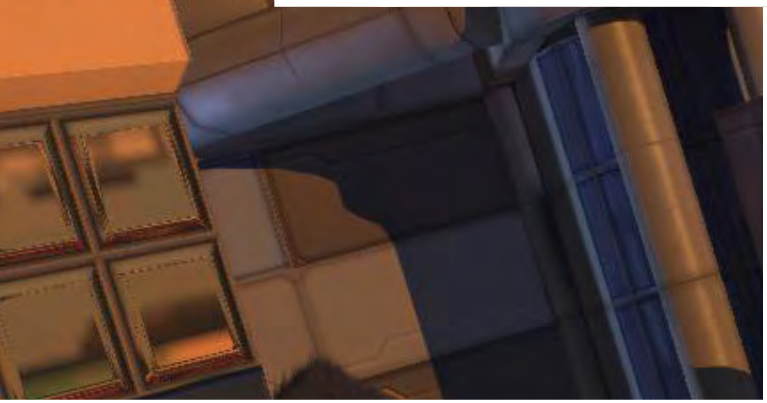
The premise is simple: two teams of five fight it out on symmetrical maps to take down their opponent's Money Ball, by spawning AI-controlled bots and using their own zany class-orientated abilities to take down turrets, disable shields and crack open the other team's coin-spilling globe. Every robot or human kill earns you XP, which allows players to improve their pro character's abilities for that specific match, and cash which you spend via bot-spawning points, missile turrets and other weaponry.

This dual-layered approach to the core objective means you don't only have to worry about the slowly marching bots heading to your Money Ball, but also the human competition who are trying to win the game. It's a great concept and due to the small five-versus-five player count, you really feel as though every move you make has a real consequence in the wider battle. The flip-side of that is when players drop out or don't know how to properly wield the pro they're playing as, it's very easy for battles to become lopsided. That ties into a wider problem with *SMNC*, which is for a free-to-play game it doesn't introduce its core concepts very well at all. There's no interactive tutorial to follow – instead players are just pointed

Most pros have some kind of grandiose melee attack.



Stationary Turrets are key to the battle and they needed to be protected at all costs.



towards an in-game help encyclopedia and online videos to find out what the hell to do with the surprisingly diverse roster of pros.

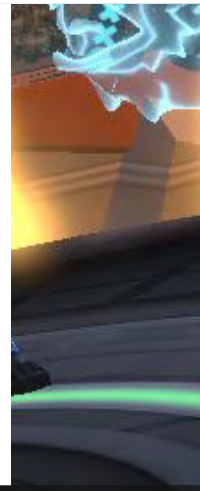
Every few days the selection of free pros rotates, with the option of unlocking one pro permanently by purchasing him, her or indeed it from the in-game store. As a result, it's easy to find yourself in a game and not know exactly what your chosen hero's special abilities actually do, or in what scenarios their secondary weapon is perhaps better to use than the primary.

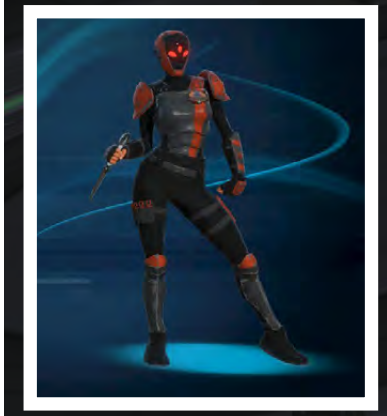
Obviously there's no substitute for practicing against real players, but to master any of *SMNC*'s five different classes takes at least several matches, at which point you've probably made enough mistakes to cost any team you're part of the victory. This barrier to entry is immensely frustrating, as *SMNC* has the potential to be a genuine online phenomenon

> *"SMNC has the potential to be a genuine online phenomenon"*

akin to *Team Fortress 2* or *Tribes: Ascend*, but Uber Entertainment just need to figure out how to introduce their eccentric collection of heroes in a better way.

In fact, eccentric is a good way to surmise this MOBA altogether actually, as matches are constantly punctuated by events like a giant angry chicken entering the arena or a charitable mascot making an appearance, who throws out gifts and gold whenever he's peppered with bullets while frolicking around a special zone. It's these kinds of touches which make matches really enjoyable from





STAY CLASSY

Super Monday Night Combat does have five regimented labels which all the pros fall under – Commandos, Strikers, Enforcers, Defenders, Sharpshooters – but each of the playable characters on offer handles differently from their peers, usually with weapons and abilities which are entirely exclusive to them. Players can enhance these abilities by messing around in *SMNC*'s confusing yet powerful customisation suite – adding new endorsements to their superstar, granting a higher chance of critical attacks, raising its health count or increasing rates of weapon fire etc.

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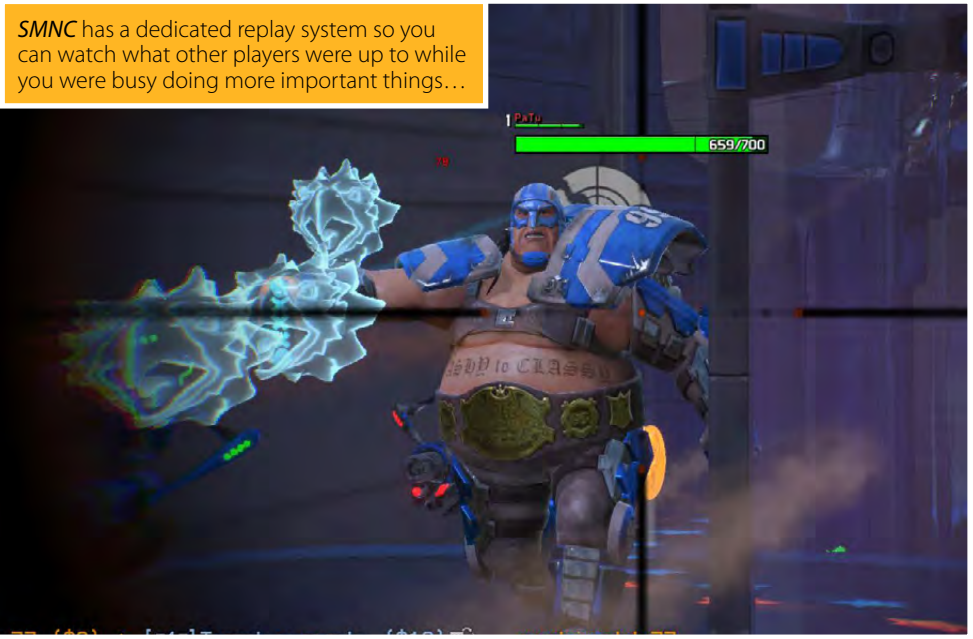
Why yes, that is a giant chicken just meandering around the battlefield.

SMNC has a dedicated replay system so you can watch what other players were up to while you were busy doing more important things…



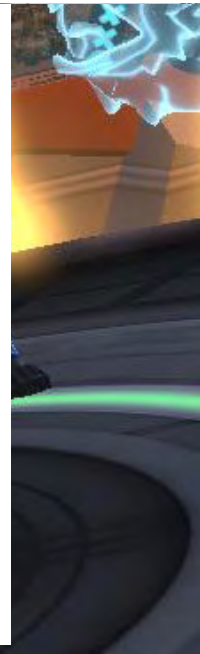
moment-to-moment, and the announcer duo who offer commentary on the action really help to sell the gameshow aesthetic. Granted, after a few hours play you'll have heard most of their enjoyable banter, but this small audio touch is still a very nice idea which few competitive online games have taken advantage of.

How much of *SMNC*'s content came over from this game's predecessor is up for debate, but Uber win plenty of kudos for allowing players to purchase everything in the in-game store – be it ability-enhancing endorsements, XP boosts, weapon skins or characters – with gold you can earn merely by playing the game, in addition to real-world cash. That's something fewer and fewer free-to-play games are doing nowadays and the team deserve a great deal of credit for not placing paying players above their more committed yet cash-shy brethren. It's a shame the in-game equipment and endorsement drops aren't a bit more common, but that's the nature of the free-to-play beast.

> *"There's still a lot of scope for Uber Entertainment to expand the game"*

In terms of raw content there's only five maps at the moment and two game modes, one of which makes the *SMNC* feel sufficiently faster with rebuildable turrets and more powerful weaponry, but there's still a lot of scope for Uber Entertainment to expand the game and we have no doubt that they will.

In the fast growing arena shooter genre, *Super Monday Night Combat* certainly ranks as one of the best, even if it does have problems. It's lacking a lot in terms of approachability, with the most confusing menu design we've dealt with for some time, but in playability terms it's really fun and bursting with character and that's something definitely worth celebrating in what is usually such a stale field. ■



FINAL VERDICT

Not the most elegant MOBA out there, but certainly one of the most charismatic and enjoyable

- ⊕ Bursting with oodles of personality
- ⊕ Lots of customisation options to lose yourself in
- ⊖ No interactive tutorial

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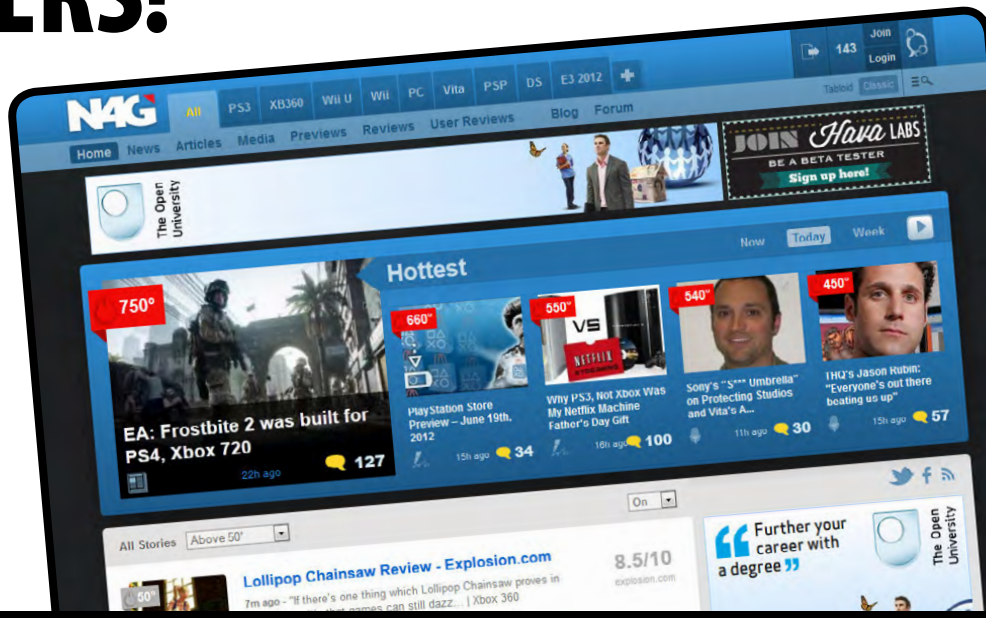

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